

House of Commons Debates.

FIFTH SESSION—EIGHTH PARLIAMENT.

SPEECH

OF

MR. HENRI BOURASSA, M.P.

ON

QUESTION OF PRIVILEGE

OTTAWA, THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 8, 1900.

Mr. HENRI BOURASSA (Labelle). Mr. Speaker, I am sure that neither you nor any other member of this House expected that such a small cause would produce such a big effect. At first I felt disposed to stand as a defender of the gentleman who sent the report to the *Free Press*, but I feel now rather disposed to vote for the expulsion of any member of the press gallery if the shortest newspaper report forces us to listen to such a long page from the history of this country, and to such a complete autobiography as we have been subjected to. In a general way I fully partake of the view expressed by the right hon. Prime

Minister and the hon. leader of the opposition, that every speech which is uttered not only in this House, but on every public platform in the country, should be faithfully and correctly reported by the representatives of the press, whatever may be the political shade of either the speaker or the reporter. If there is anything wanting in the political life of this country, it is accuracy and independence in the reports and articles that appear in the public press. But in the present instance, let us look at the sentence which was objected to by the hon. leader of the opposition:

He (Sir Charles Tupper) attacked the French in a most bitter way, but said he did not include all French Canadians.

The hon. gentleman has thought proper to give these words an interpretation which, if correct, would lead me to agree with him that the reporter had misquoted the hon. gentleman. But there is a slight distinction to be made, which is very important under the circumstances, and which the hon. gentleman did not make. The report did not say that Sir Charles Tupper attacked the French Canadians in a most bitter way, but said he did not include the whole of them. It stated that he attacked the 'French' in a most bitter way, but said he did not include all French Canadians. Now what do I find in *Hansard*? Speaking of the hon. Minister of Public Works (Mr. Tarte), whom the hon. gentleman has thought proper to attack to-day, not knowing, I am sure, that that hon. gentleman is now lying in his bed and is therefore not able to be here to defend himself, the hon. gentleman said:

I need not say to the House that the Minister of Public Works (Mr. Tarte) is the person to whom I allude. I draw attention to the fact that he had just come from France, a country that unhappily at this moment is in the most bitter antagonism against England. He had just come from that country which daily, through its press, and through its public men, is declaring the most enthusiastic sympathy with the Boers. He had just come from a country that is denouncing England, that is gloating over every misfortune to our arms and rejoicing at every triumph of the enemy. It appears to me that the hon. gentleman (Mr. Tarte) became imbued with the atmosphere by which he was surrounded, and so let us hear his first declaration after his arrival in Canada.

Again, the hon. gentleman, referring to an incident which I shall have another opportunity to speak about, said:

We have witnessed the hon. member for Labelle (Mr. Bourassa) taking the very course I speak of. He took, apparently, a very independent, high-handed and dignified course. No doubt, he did so under the direction of the members of this government, under the direction, as I believe, I do not hesitate to say, of the Minister of Public Works, and in order to strengthen the French position—not the Canadian French position, but the French position—he had taken, and to prevent anything being done to show sympathy with Great Britain in the struggle with the Boers in which she is now engaged.

Mr. Speaker, I ask any man of good faith in this House if these words which I have just quoted are not to the effect that Mr. Tarte, having been in France, brought to this country the feelings of the French people against Great Britain. I am not here to defend the Minister of Public Works, who, when he is in the House, is quite able to reply to the hon. leader of the opposition. Nor am I going to defend myself as to my personal relations with the Minister of Public Works. I shall have an opportunity on

the proper occasion of placing before the House the whole course which I thought proper in my conscience to take since last session, and I will then deal with the large and the small incidents connected with my resignation, my campaign in the county of Labelle, and my re-entrance into the House. If I needed to borrow reasons from anybody to defend my course, I might adopt the words in which the hon. leader of the opposition to-day tendered such kind absolution to the hon. member for West York (Mr. Wallace). But I will not use them; I shall have a better defence.

But the point I want to make is this, that the hon. leader of the opposition, misquoting facts and forgetting dates, has tried to prove that the position taken by the Minister of Public Works and by the hon. member for Laprairie and Napierville (Mr. Monet), and by myself was the position of Frenchmen and not of French Canadians, and therefore that the loyal British citizens, electors in the county of Labelle, who thought proper to send me here unanimously, and the British citizens who are electors of Laprairie and Napierville, who have not thought proper to differ from the view of their member, did not act on this occasion as French Canadians, but as Frenchmen.

With regard to the report sent to the *Winnipeg Free Press*, I do not know what the context was, but, taking the words themselves as quoted by the hon. leader of the opposition, they are a perfectly correct résumé of his speech. It is certainly the right of the hon. gentleman, if he thinks proper, to attack the policy of the French government or the feelings of the French people. I am not here to defend them. But the hon. gentleman, who is sometimes apt to mix dates, forgets that at the time the Minister of Public Works was in France and at the time he came back to Canada, the feelings of the French people had not been roused on the subject of the war in South Africa; but there had been an incident developed in Paris shortly previous to that time which called for an exchange of messages between the French government and the British government—an unfortunate incident which, for the sake of the peace of Europe and the peace of the whole world, was settled in the proper way, thanks to the good spirit and the courtesy of the French government of the time. I refer to the Fashoda incident, which was made so much of by the jingo element of England and the jingo element of Canada and to which the Tories of England and the Tories of Canada resorted so freely in their appeals to the fanatic sentiment of the lower sort of electors.

Fortunately, broad-minded journalists in both countries endeavoured to restore feelings of reconciliation between the people of France and England, and that reconcilia-

tion was effected, thanks to the broad policy of Lord Salisbury in England and the wise, intelligent policy of Mr. Delcasse in France. Therefore to say that the sojourn of the hon. Minister of Public Works in France was the means of causing discord and antagonism between French and English in Canada is utterly false and not borne out by any words that may have fallen from the lips of that gentleman whom the hon. leader of the opposition has thought proper to attack in this debate. I never try to judge the intentions of any man; and as a young member of parliament I would not attempt to belittle the intentions and purposes of the hon. gentleman. But, as a matter of fact, the words that he uttered the other day, a résumé of which was sent to the *Winnipeg Free Press*, and those he has uttered to-day are just of a character to prejudice people who do not know thoroughly the feelings of the French Canadians of the province of Quebec and to misrepresent the real intentions of those who, on the present occasion, have not thought proper to go as far as the majority of the people of this country, or speaking for myself, as far as the government of the country has thought proper to go. He has no right to attempt, as he has done, to prove that our feelings correspond with those of the French people of France; and I take this occasion to make a statement which is nothing new but which, strange to say, has to be repeated often though it ought to be well known to this country. It would be one of the greatest mistakes made by public man in Canada and a mistake that might be the cause of great misfortune, to think that the feelings which exist between French Canadians and English Canadians in Canada are the same as those which exist between the people of France and the people of England. I do not say this because I am ashamed of my origin or of the country from which my ancestors came, who were first loyal subjects of the king of France and afterwards became as loyal subjects of the king of England. I glory in my French origin, I have no reason to be ashamed of the people who live in old France; but it is utterly false for any one to compare the differences that may exist between the English and French in Europe to those that may exist between English and French Canadians. I do not wish to go at length into this matter but may take another occasion to do so.

As regards the hon. gentleman (Sir Charles Tupper), who went over the whole story of his life in order to prove that he is not a fanatic or a bigot, let me here say that I do not believe he is either. I believe that the hon. gentleman, whatever may have been his political faults in the past, on which I am not called to pass judgment to-day, is a broad-minded man in those matters. But unfortunately circumstances have

placed him at the head of a party which has based its success too often upon religious and national cries.

Some hon. MEMBERS. No, no.

Some hon. MEMBERS. Hear, hear.

Mr. BOURASSA. I am not going either to say—

Some hon. MEMBERS. Take it back.

Mr. BOURASSA. No, I shall not. I will prove it.

Some hon. MEMBERS. Hear, hear.

Some hon. MEMBERS. Take it back.

Mr. BOURASSA. I am not going to say now—

An hon. MEMBER. Be a gentleman.

Mr. BOURASSA. I am not going to say that the Conservative party has had in the past, or has in the present, a monopoly of those appeals to religious and national prejudices. I am free to admit that in some instances, unfortunately, some groups of Liberals also have appealed to national and religious prejudices. I know that in the Conservative party there have been in the past, as there are in the present, among both English and French members of that party, men of good will and broad minds who would be ashamed to appeal to those prejudices; but there is at the same time an element in that party that has very often forced the leaders of that party to make declarations which, left to themselves, they would never have made. But does that excuse them? I must say that the hon. gentleman himself, who leads the opposition, whatever may be the differences between us, is after all one of the most remarkable figures in Canada. He was one of the founders of confederation, he has been one of the noted public men, not only of Canada, but of the British Empire, and I am proud to say it; but it is most unfortunate that that hon. gentleman, for the purpose of securing votes, felt himself compelled to use such language as has been quoted to-day and to make such appeals as he was obliged to resort to in the city of Winnipeg.

The hon. gentleman has tried to-day, and not for the first time, to explain the speech he made in Winnipeg. I quite agree that he might have told the people of Winnipeg that they could just as safely put their confidence in him as in Sir Wilfrid Laurier, that they could just as well rely on the policy of the Conservative party to settle the school question as on that of the Liberal party; but I ask, what was the use of his appealing to the people of Winnipeg on this ground—'I a Protestant and he (Sir Wilfrid Laurier) a Catholic'? How did that religious difference affect the question? What did it matter, as regards the policy of either party, if Sir Charles Tupper was

an English Protestant and Sir Wilfrid Laurier a French Catholic? We know that one word or two, falling at a particular moment from the lips of a man occupying the position which the hon. gentleman then held, are more pregnant and more effective for evil than a whole tirade of religious appeals by smaller men.

It has been said, Mr. Speaker, that during the elections of 1896 the French Liberal party resorted to racial and disloyal appeals.

Some hon. MEMBERS. Hear, hear.

Mr. BOURASSA. It has been stated that during the elections of 1896 all the French Catholics in the province of Quebec, supporting the Liberal party, appealed to the French electorate in this way: Put into power Sir Wilfrid Laurier, a Frenchman and a Roman Catholic, and he will certainly settle the question better than Sir Charles Tupper could, an Englishman and a Protestant. Well, during the elections of 1896 I looked after my election. I went through some of the surrounding counties and I read a good many newspaper articles. Of course, some of those articles had a bellicose tone, fully equal to that of the newspaper articles supporting hon. gentlemen opposite. But I think it would be childish for real statesmen to come here and go through all the columns of newspapers to try to prove that one party or the other held feelings that the people really never entertained and which were really never given utterance to by the leading men of either party.

Sir, what was the argument of the French Liberal candidates of the province of Quebec as to the school question. When the Bill came up for the second reading in 1896 and the leader of the opposition of that day, followed by the large majority of his party, voted against the second reading, hon. gentlemen opposite knew, and their newspapers knew, and their stump speakers knew, that the French Liberals had not voted with the intention of appealing to the racial and religious feelings of Quebec. I am not here to pass judgment on the conduct of either of the great political parties at that time. I was not a member of this House then. I may say that if I refrain from passing judgment, it is not because I am afraid to do so, but because it is useless. I am merely pointing out that the position taken by the French Liberals of Quebec was not a position that was supposed to bring them into favour with their countrymen and co-religionists. But they gave that vote, and in the campaign that followed, this was their general argument, throughout the province of Quebec: The Conservatives have been in power for six years since this question arose. During that time they did nothing until the very last session of parliament, when so short a time remained that they could not hope to secure the pas-

sage of the measure they proposed. They did this in spite of the notice and advice that had been given them as soon as in 1895 by the then Minister of Agriculture, Mr. Angers, who thought fit to leave the cabinet on that ground. He told them that whatever might be their good will, if they waited until the last session of the parliament, they would not be able to settle the question. Still, they waited until the last session, and had only three months before the time of the expiry of parliament. They knew that their Bill could not pass. The policy of the Liberal party was different. Instead of trying to take legal means that could not apply, they wanted to try by conciliation to bring the Manitoba people to settle by themselves this question which they themselves had brought into the political arena. That was the difference between the two parties. And I say that if the province of Quebec voted in favour of the Liberals on the school question, it was because the feeling prevailed in that province, and has always prevailed, that, as so often expressed by the Liberal leader, an ounce of conciliation is better than a pound of coercion. Whatever may have been the local feeling in one part of the province or the other, the broad line that differentiated the two parties throughout the province was that one tried to settle the school question by law, while the other tried to settle it by conciliation. That was the real difference.

And, speaking of racial and religious appeals, when we came back to this House and this government tried to settle the school question by conciliation with the Manitoba government, when they entered into negotiations and when the Roman Catholic supporters of this government, anxious to see that question settled, anxious to see peace established, not only in Manitoba, but in their own province, took steps to that end, what did we see? These members sent, as it was their right to send, a petition to the head of the Church, asking him to send to this country a representative of his high moral authority—not to do anything against the civil authority of this country, not to do anything against the power of the Crown, but simply to settle with the least friction the religious differences that had existed between a certain portion of the clergy of the province of Quebec and a portion of the laity. And what was the spectacle that we saw in this House? We saw members, and particularly the hon. member to whom the leader of the opposition (Sir Charles Tupper) has, this afternoon, tendered so kind a hand, telling the people that the Liberal government had appealed to the Pope of Rome to assist them in ruling this country. Sir, if ever a strong appeal to religious feeling was made in this House, since I became a member of it at least, it was in this effort to fasten a charge of disloyalty upon the Liberal party

and the Liberal government, because the Catholic members of the party thought proper, without asking the permission of the hon. member for West York (Mr. Wallace), to use the liberty guaranteed under British rule to citizens of all creeds and nationalities to take the proper means established by their Church to settle a question of religious difference.

There was another question which the hon. gentleman thought proper to bring into the discussion. He speaks of a brochure that was distributed in 1896 concerning the three millions of dollars which appeared in the budget of the Conservative government for buying guns, carbines and other weapons. Sir, knowing as you do, the feelings that I entertain on the question of war in general, you will not be surprised to hear me say that, if all the words contained in that brochure are not right, at least the spirit is not wrong, from my point of view. Sir, the hon. gentleman tried to say that the Liberals who issued that brochure in the province of Quebec entertained disloyal feelings toward England because they saw in the buying of these weapons an effort on the part of the Conservative government to bring Canada into such relations with Great Britain as would force Canada to act with England in all her wars. I have never read the brochure referred to; I did not have it distributed in my county. The position I took in my county was this: I am opposed to militarism for Canada. I consider Canada a pacific country, a country happily situated far from the rivalries which always threatened to destroy the peace of Europe and bring into armed conflict the great powers of the world. It is fortunate for us that our country is so situated, that we may invite the peaceful people of all nationalities to come and settle here. I was in favour of the policy of conciliation, not only for the races that live in Canada, but also for the nations of the wide world. Therefore, I did not think proper to approve of a policy that meant that we were going to war. I am speaking now of my personal position. But certainly, when that brochure was written and circulated and when the general elections came on, there was never any idea generally propounded in this country, either by one party or the other, that Canada was to be an armed nation. Therefore, I say, that it was proper, at least it was open, for any candidate, either Liberal or Conservative, to declare himself opposed to any military

preparations for this country, to declare himself opposed to any policy that would bring Canada into closer relationship with Great Britain, so far as military operations were concerned—and for any candidate taking such a position did not lay himself open to a justifiable accusation of disloyalty to Great Britain.

I am not going to discuss that point now, because we shall have another occasion to discuss it at length, along with the other points that have been mentioned. I merely want to say that times change, and when we wish to criticise members' words and acts we must place ourselves at the time when they spoke and acted. I say that at the time that brochure was written and published nobody could accuse any man of disloyalty to England because he was opposed to Canada preparing for war. Times have changed, as we have often been told by hon. gentlemen opposite, and at the present time a different spirit has developed in this country. At that time it was perfectly legitimate—I do not say to use all the words that may have been used in that brochure—but to entertain those ideas and to speak upon those issues.

Now, I have spoken at much greater length than I had intended, but I have been compelled to do so by the lengthy remarks of the hon. gentleman himself. But to sum up my argument, let me say that the hon. gentleman has no right, based upon anything which may have been said by hon. gentlemen on this side, to accuse of disloyalty any French Canadian British subjects in this country. We have a right to understand and to interpret the constitution of this country according to our judgment, and we have a right to do so without being charged with disloyalty. We have a right to interpret the British constitution, and the Canadian constitution, according to our judgment, without laying ourselves open to the charge of disloyalty because our interpretation differs from that of the Tory party. There was no occasion for charging us with entertaining different views from those our words express, there was no occasion at all for insinuating that we were acting as Frenchmen in sympathy with France, instead of as British subjects. I say that the hon. gentleman opposite having uttered those words, that I have quoted, he cannot now complain if the press of the country interpret his words as an attempt to raise the race and religious cry in Canada.